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Documents as social actors: a study of digital tutorials using actor-network-theory and the concept of documentary practices

[Trine Schreiber](#)

Introduction. Digital tutorials designed in a user participation project in 2018 are seen as documents. The aim is to analyse the social roles of these documents and to demonstrate how two theoretical approaches, actor-network-theory (ANT) and the concept of documentary practices, complement each other in such analysis.

Method. Using ethnographic methods, i.e. interviews and participant-observation, the author followed the design processes of the tutorials and the translations among actors involved. **Analysis.** First, the paper applies ANT-based concepts of network and translation in analysis of four documents. Second, an analysis including the concept of documentary practices is suggested and discussed (e.g. Frohmann, 2004a; Lundh and Dolatkhah, 2016).

Results. Each document represents different networks and practices. By opening up documents, libraries obtain information about strategies shaped by relationships and translations. Thus, document analysis might become an important tool for improving organisational practices.

Conclusions. The ANT analysis revealed the relationships and translations by which the four documents were constituted. Using Frohmann's approach, it

was shown that the documents were connected to different documentary practices. The two approaches generated insights into how activities as part of a user participation project could bring particular forms of documents and their outcomes into being.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in the conceptual literature exploring the theoretical, historical, and empirical aspects of documentation within the field of library and information studies ([Berryman, 2018](#); [Huvila, 2019](#); [Lundh and Dolatkhah, 2016](#); [Lundh, Dolatkhah and Limberg, 2018](#); [McKenzie and Davies, 2010](#); [Sundberg and Kjellman, 2018](#)). Many of the studies focus on the social function of documents, with inspiration from Brown and Duguid ([1996](#)), Frohmann ([2004a, 2004b](#)), Orlikowski and Yates ([1994](#)), Østerlund ([2008](#)), and Smith ([1974, 2001](#)). At the same time, there have appeared discussions about the analytical strategies for studying documents and document work ([Gorichanaz, 2019](#); [Lundh, Dolatkhah and Limberg, 2018](#)). The aim of this paper is to continue such discussion by focusing on documents as social and communicative agents.

The documents to be analysed in this paper consist of digital tutorials in libraries. Twelve digital tutorials were designed by librarians and students in a user participation project in seven Danish educational libraries in 2017-2018. This paper has two aims. Its first aim is to analyse the social roles played by these documents. The analysis applies two theoretical approaches: actor-network-theory (ANT) and Frohmann's concept of documentary practices. Its second aim of the paper is to establish how these two theoretical approaches might complement each other in such kind of analysis. As part of this second aim, we will examine what kind of discursive constructions of the concept of information these documents might represent.

In carrying out the analysis, I begin by describing actor-network-theory (ANT). I then apply actor-network-theory to a study of the tutorials mentioned. In this paper, four of the twelve tutorials have been selected for closer consideration. Following this, I present Frohmann's ([2004a, 2004b](#)) concept of documentary practices, showing how this concept can be a valuable supplement to the actor-network-theory approach.

User participation project

During 2017-2018, seven Danish educational libraries linked to several higher education institutions participated in the project 'Co-creation: Students as Co-producers in Development of Digital e-Learning Products in Libraries'. The goal of the project was to encourage collaboration between librarians and students to design e-learning products, i.e. digital tutorials on information literacy. The project was jointly funded by Denmark's Electronic Research Library (DEFF) (<http://informationr.net/ir/24-4/colis/www.deff.dk/english>) and by the libraries themselves. Over a period of two years, twelve groups of librarians and students designed their own digital tutorials. All twelve tutorials can be seen on the website <http://library.au.dk/blog/co-creation/>

User participation has been a recurring organisational practice in Danish libraries since the beginning of 2010s. Inspired by participation on social media ([Jenkins et al., 2005](#)), Lankes, Silverstein, Nicholson and Marshall ([2007](#)) introduced the concept of participatory library.

Other researchers have offered similar concepts, such as Library 2.0 ([Rasmussen, 2016](#)). User participation in libraries can be manifested in many ways: ‘volunteers’, ‘interactive displays’, ‘workshops’, ‘user-driven innovation’, etc. ([Rasmussen, 2016](#)). The category ‘user-driven innovation’ denotes a process of co-creation in which users participate in developing library services in collaboration with library staff. In the co-creation project discussed here, the aim was for the librarians and students to collaborate in developing a user-driven innovation of digital tutorials on information literacy. The intention was to increase the students’ use of such tutorials.

The precise meaning of ‘innovation’ seems unclear. Does ‘innovation’ mean that the design of a tutorial is organised in a new way? Or does it mean that the document work of the tutorial differs from the work of previous tutorials in libraries? In the formal description of the co-creation project, the tutorials are supposed only to reflect a chosen profile of the libraries as well as the students’ desires ([Project Bank of Libraries, 2019](#)). In this paper, the twelve tutorials are considered ‘documents’. As documents, the tutorials serve as a bank of evidence and memories of the project. In this the paper, we examine the role of these documents as potential social and communicative agents in libraries. The purpose is to assess their ability to bring new discursive constructions into being.

Actor-network-theory

Under certain circumstances, documents can play a role in social life. They can enforce power and organize communicative actions in a specific way within a particular social context (Brown and Duguid, [1996, 2000](#); [Levy, 2003](#); Smith, [1974, 2001](#); [Smith and Schryer, 2008](#); [Sundberg and Kjellman, 2018](#)). From an actor-network-theory (ANT) perspective, a document’s role or ability to enforce power or organise actions is not given *a priori*. Nor is this role based on the document’s character as a carrier of information. Rather, it is the other way around. A document’s roles or abilities are seen as effects of associations between heterogeneous elements leading to the formation of actor-networks ([Latour, 2005](#)). It is actions and relationships between both human and non-human actors that can explain why a certain document plays a certain role in a particular social context, and why it can legitimately represent a certain information more than other actors.

Actor-network-theory uses the word translation to describe the interrelation of heterogeneous actors in a process that not only binds them to each other, but also brings new constructs into being ([Andersen, 2013](#), p.73). The term translation is borrowed from Michel Serres. Following Brown ([2002](#)), Serres defined translation as “the process of making connections, of forging a passage between two domains, or simply as establishing communication” ([Brown, 2002](#), p.5; [Andersen, 2013](#), p.73). Translation is a form of communication, a message passing between points ([Brown, 2002](#), p.7). At the same time, translation can be seen as a kind of distortion referring to relational transformations. Brown ([2002](#)) observes that “To translate is to transform, and in the act of transforming a breaking of fidelity towards the original source is necessarily involved” ([Brown, 2002](#), p.7). Therefore, actor-networks are seen as continuously evolving and transforming through processes of translation ([Carlsson, Hanell and Lindh, 2013](#); [Schreiber, 2017](#)). Such translations take place constantly, but with different consequences ([Latour, 1987](#); [Law, 2009](#)). Sometimes translations – in spite of relational transformations – help to keep a network alive. Through these processes, an actor-network may find a stable form in a limited period of time or more permanently. In other situations, a translation process may fail.

In this paper, the concept of translation will be used to show how actors involved in the design and production of a digital tutorial bring different relationships into play. Based on this analysis, we can show what kind of preliminary network each tutorial is part of and the social function of these tutorials in relation to, respectively, the libraries and the students.

Concept of documentary practices

Analysing scientific literature, Frohmann ([2004a](#), [2004b](#)) presents historical examples from the history of early modern science to show that a document becomes informative only in the context of specific kinds of documentary practices. Frohmann describes how the institutions operating at a particular time and place disciplined the manner in which science was documented, and how these practices constituted a particular set of discursive resources for the articulation of scientific truth. In Frohmann's view, discourse exists only if it is materially expressed in practices, texts, artefacts, etc. Examining the history of early modern science, Frohmann finds documentary practices to be characterized by a degree of stability. Hence, "Once practices stabilize, information can emerge" (Frohmann ([2004b](#), p.18). In other words, the informativeness of a document depends on the relative stability of certain kinds of practices. Information lies not in the document as such, but rather emerges as an effect of such practices.

Frohmann has listed four "properties of documentary practices", which relate to the informativeness of documents: "their materiality; their institutional sites; the ways in which they are socially disciplined; and their historical contingency" ([Frohmann, 2004a](#), p.387). As an analytical strategy, these four properties are key points in a description of stable documentary practices.

Lundh and Dolatkhah ([2016](#)) have exemplified how the four properties described by Frohmann can be enacted. They utilised the concept of document work ([Trace, 2007](#)), which underscored the reciprocity between two analytical levels, where document work referred to situational negotiations and activities, and documentary practices were understood as socio-historical traditions. The two levels helped to conceptualise one of the properties mentioned by Frohmann, that of historical contingency. Further, the reciprocity between the two levels was understood as a "dialogical interplay" between document work and documentary practices ([Lundh and Dolatkhah, 2016](#), p.132), i.e. when a specific activity, in this case reading, became manifest as situated document work and changed over time as sociocultural traditions.

In a recent study, Lundh, Dolatkhah and Limberg continued their analysis of reading seen as a document work that constituted and was constituted by documentary practices. As part of presenting stable documentary practices, they focused on the social project of introducing a new compulsory and comprehensive school in Sweden in the 1960s, and in particular, how a discourse of informational reading emerged and was manifested within this project. They used the concept of document work to describe the students' activities in the classroom in 1968/69, and the concept of documentary practices to describe traditions that persisted over longer periods of time ([Lundh, et al., 2018](#), p.1045). This historical analysis formed the basis for their discussion of continuity and change in Swedish schools. The other three properties cited by Frohmann were also included in their historical analysis.

In comparing classroom situations from the 1960s with classroom situations today, Lund et al. (2018) found in both cases reading as “fragmentary, facts-oriented, and procedure-oriented” (2018, p.1048). They illustrated these features by showing how a particular style of reading, i.e. which they called informational reading, could be seen as a predecessor to information activities in contemporary school settings (Lundh et al., 2018, p.1042). Informational reading was understood as looking “for written information in order to solve a school task” (Lundh et al., 2018, p. 1045). Informational reading was viewed as “part of a long reading tradition involving a rationalistic, utilitarian mode of reading, in contrast to an experiential, emotional mode of reading” (Lundh et al., 2018, p.1048). In other words, older documentary practices influenced the way students carried out information activities in relation to reading tasks in classrooms. Their analysis demonstrated how a specific kind of discursive construction of the concept of information emerged and stabilised over a period of many years.

Lund et al.’s analysis using Frohmann’s list of properties, supplemented by Trace’s concept of document work, highlights a specific kind of analytical strategy. By underscoring the need for a historical perspective in understanding activities of today, their approach differs from the approach of actor-network-theory. As actor-network-theory, it enhances the importance of stability in showing how contingent practices achieve legitimacy as the ‘right’ and ‘acceptable’ way to do something. However, following actor-network-theory, the stability involves keeping an actor-network alive in moments of doings, while with Frohmann, the stability covers a long-term tradition of activities that construct a specific kind of informativeness.

The following section describes the user participation project. We then apply the actor-network-theory approach to the empirical material. Finally, we will show how the actor-network-theory approach can be supplemented by Frohmann’s documentary practices’ analytical strategy.

The collaborative tutorial project

Librarians from seven Danish educational libraries and students from seven institutions of higher education participated in the user participation project in 2017-2018. Twelve groups, consisting in total of about 25 librarians and 25 students, were asked to design twelve digital tutorials on information literacy. During spring 2018, the author conducted interviews with the librarians and students from all twelve teams. Some of the team members were interviewed twice. In two cases, focus group interviews were conducted with librarians and students together. In other cases, the librarians and students were interviewed separately. The interviews, which were audio-recorded, centered on questions such as how the collaboration process took place, the students’ wishes in terms of tutorials, how the design thinking process developed, and how both groups evaluated the outcome. Other ethnographically inspired methods were used, e.g. participant-observation in design meetings. In addition, I studied documents such as project descriptions, preliminary reports from each team, etc. (Marcus, 1995; Carlsson et al., 2013). The author followed the design process of the tutorials and the translations from initial ideas to prototypes.

The coding process of the interviews and textual documentation was carried out in two steps. First, by studying the material, it was possible to identify how relationships were established, how they were replaced by new relationships, and how the translations changed. The accounts of the actors were investigated, and a list of assumptions was formulated regarding

how the constitution of relationships should be interpreted. Second, the relationships and translations were tentatively connected to concepts from the two selected theoretical approaches. By choosing concepts, the researcher herself intervened into the relationships identified. In this part of the coding, the researcher posed questions about how the relations were organised, whether they were loosely connected or had become stabilized, etc.

Examining the design of digital tutorials in libraries as document work can be seen as an approach that Smith (2005) has called institutional ethnography. Smith studied how documents enter into people's local practices of writing, searching, reading, etc. She investigated how a given institutional document connected a local setting into a larger regulatory organisation. When a document has a standardised form, it not only mediates but also regulates and authorises certain activities (Smith, 2001, 2005). This kind of approach raises a central question regarding the design of digital tutorials in libraries: To the extent that they are standardised documents, do they then regulate certain activities?

Analysis using the actor-network-theory (ANT) approach

In the following, the design processes of four tutorials have been selected. They will be described with a background in the interviews and participant-observation. In this paper, I only focus on how the four design processes were distinguished from each other. The analysis proceeded by contrasting two enactments of the user participation project called 'the videos' and 'the websites'.

The videos

In two of the four design processes, the librarians initiated the project by advertising on Facebook, among other media, with the goal of trying to get the attention of students. In both cases, some students contacted the libraries, and the librarians invited them to an upcoming meeting. Next, in each of the two cases, a working group consisting of both librarians and students was established. At subsequent meetings, the librarians allowed the students to freely choose the design, material, and content of the tutorial. Both observation and interviews were showing that the librarians facilitated the process more than they interfered.

In the first case (video 1), the students made a list of those features they felt were needed in an educational library of today. One of the proposals was a creative tool intended to help students with reading problems. In collaboration with the librarians, the students decided that the group should design a creative tool on reading strategies.

In the other case (video 2), the students were inspired by the physical area of the library. They considered that other students would benefit by knowing more about the different rooms in the library. Among others, there was a kitchen where students could make coffee, prepare food for lunch, and there were also rooms for reading, talking, etc. The students proposed that a video should be made about the library's study rooms.

In both cases, the students were strongly engaged in their education. Their fields of study and the courses they were taking were central actors in the network. In the case of video 1, the students who contacted the library to join the project were studying pedagogy, whereas in the case of video 2, the students were taking a course in ethnographic methods.

The first group, who made video 1, considered various media as potential tools for mediating reading advice. The participating educational institutions had equipment for producing videos. Students and librarians agreed on using that media. The equipment was an additional actor in the network. All students and librarians involved participated in the design and production of three videos. The videos presented three interviews with, respectively, a graduate student and two pedagogical supervisors, in which they explained how to improve one's reading strategies. The librarians interviewed expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the process. They saw the chosen topic of reading advice as something outside their normal area of work. However, they knew reading was a central issue for many students. They estimated that advice on this topic might support students' information activities. Thus, the translations of both librarians and students met each other on common ground.

The students from the other group, video 2, having taken a course on ethnographic methods, wanted to investigate how students in general were using the library rooms. Thus, they interviewed people sitting in the rooms as they worked on their study assignments. The librarians acknowledged that this kind of ethnographic investigation provided them with information about how people use the library facilities. For the participating students, it was an opportunity to carry out a kind of mini-fieldwork. Further, one of the students had a friend who was film producer. In deciding to produce a video, they involved the friend in the network. Also in this group, in spite of different translations, the librarians and students met on common ground.

In both groups, the relationships that had been established had the character of being student-driven processes. Still, there was a close dialogue between the librarians and the students. There were discussions about selections of video sequences. In the end, the videos were judged as 'right' and 'acceptable' by both students and librarians. In this way, the tutorials, seen as documents, were boundary objects for both the participating students and the librarians ([Huvila, 2019](#); [Østerlund, 2008](#)).

The websites

In the other two cases, the mobilising of preliminary networks started in quite another way. In one of the cases (website 1), a group of students approached the library requesting more information about some particular databases. After further discussion with these students, the librarians decided to suggest that the students participated in a co-creation group with them. Together with the librarians, the students would solve the problem of information about the databases. The librarians interpreted the task as relevant for the library, but they wanted to find a way to communicate the information in a manner which was in line with the students' needs. The students accepted the invitation, and a network was established. Thus, from the beginning, the work on website 1 had a close relationship to an already existing work area of the library.

In the other case (website 2), the librarians began by carrying out a user investigation. They wanted to know more about the needs of their users. Based on results of the investigation, they concluded that evaluation of information sources was an urgent issue. In this way, the librarians created the framework for the development of the subsequent network. Once again, the proposed topic had a close connection to the librarians' daily work tasks. Further, the user investigation gave a degree of legitimacy to establishing relations to students, proposing that they participated in the work.

The first group attached to website 1 had meetings about the specific topic they would pursue. Based on a dialogue between the participants, they decided to produce a website. A digital platform like a website would ensure that the relevant information would be accessible for all students. The website contained descriptions and information produced by the librarians and a video presenting the utility of information produced by the students.

In the other group, website 2, the library scheduled two workshops and invited students to participate in these. Each workshop had a specific theme. The first workshop dealt with the students' preferences in situations in which they expected to receive new information. This workshop provided information about the students' needs. The librarians made a video recording of the workshop. A month after this workshop, the library invited students to a second workshop focusing on how to mediate information about evaluation of information sources in a user-friendly way. The librarians felt that they obtained a lot of material that could help them create a website that would seem 'right' in meeting the assessed needs of the students. In website 2, it was the librarians themselves, rather than the students, who designed the website.

Both teams were satisfied with the outcomes of the two websites. During the interviews, the websites found 'spokesmen' among both the students and the librarians ([Latour, 1987](#)). Each library made the sites accessible to all students. The students interviewed appreciated the product and were convinced of its utility. However, in contrast to the videos, the websites were based on relations revolving mainly around the librarians.

The two kinds of enactments of the user participation project show how the different actor-networks had diverging agendas and different compositions. These differences require that different terms be used to designate the four design processes. The term user-driven innovation processes might be applicable for the videos, whereas the term librarian-driven relationships would be a more precise characterization of how the websites were created.

Suggesting an analysis based on the concept of documentary practices

Of the four tutorials analysed here, two were based on a network mobilised mainly by the librarians and two were enrolled in a network mobilised mainly by the students. Let us now examine the four cases in terms of document work. In particular, we will discuss how they are related to the production of scientific knowledge and the types of documentary practices described by Frohmann.

As material artefacts and thus documents, the digital tutorials differ from the scientific literature analysed by Frohmann. On the other hand, library tutorials on information literacy have been and are still one means by which libraries are involved in disciplining the manner in which science is carried out. Thus, the design of tutorials on information literacy and scientific literature writing might be considered document work in interplay with the same documentary practices. If so, the tutorials must be capable of drawing on the same discursive resources for articulation of a concept of information. We will not carry out the full analysis here. It has a status of a theoretical proposal.

In order to apply the concept of documentary practices, we need to consider the situational activities carried out in designing the tutorials. As shown above, the groups behind the two

websites wanted to communicate information about databases and evaluation of information sources to a target group of students. There are many similarities between the design of these websites and digital tutorials on information literacy developed in the past by libraries themselves (Schreiber, 2013; Sundin, 2008). Hence, the websites reproduced an established document work. It could therefore be of interest to investigate whether they represent a standardised genre in libraries, not only mediating but also regulating and authorizing certain activities ([Smith, 2001](#); [Smith & Schryer, 2008](#)).

If we look at the videos, one of these focused on reading strategies; the other described the use of study rooms in the library. As document work, they reflect the changes that have taken place in educational libraries, whereby they become a venue for bringing people together in study situations ([Hansson, 2010](#)). Hansson has observed how academic libraries of the 1990s reflected values and issues outside academia ([2010](#), p.68-70). Further, if we look at the translations of the students described above, we might consider the videos as representing issues connected to the educational institutions rather than to the libraries as such. The videos thus represent a change and stand in contrast to the more standardised, potentially regulating documents ([Smith, 2001](#); [Smith and Schryer, 2008](#)).

As described above, Lundh and Dolatkah ([2016](#)) and Lundh et al. ([2018](#)) presented a tradition on reading in which documentary practices from history of educational settings might take part. They referred to document work and practices that were established before 1960s and had maintained dominance in Swedish schools from that time. The implication of these practices was a form of informational reading which they considered different from what they called experiential reading, i.e. broadly speaking, a teacher-centred versus a student-centred tradition. According to the authors, it is still possible to identify the informational reading approach in school settings of today although the experiential approach has been introduced in schools over a number of years. Inspired by this situation, it can be argued that the design of the videos as situated document work might contribute to stabilising or changing these practices. Students who participated in the design of the video tutorials might have drawn on articulations of informational or experiential reading. However, it is not possible to determine precisely which kind of reading the videos negotiated. In any case, the videos were informing in relation to documentary practices from history of educational institutions. In contrast to the videos, the two websites seemed to have their informativeness based on practices from the history of libraries intertwined with the traditions of modern science. Thus, unlike actor-network-theory, Frohmann's approach requires a determination of the different discursive constructions of the concept of information. This kind of determination is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is certainly relevant task for future research.

As indicated above, Frohmann's approach added an additional lens for considering the tutorials as situated document work, complementing the actor-network-theory focus on relationships and translations among actors involved in the preliminary network. Further, Frohmann's concept of documentary practices provided our analysis with a historical dimension, which was lacking in the actor-network-theory analysis. Nevertheless, actor-network-theory and Frohmann both define the concept of practice in a very similar way. Networks as well as documentary practices emerge and may find stability depending on the relationships between the participating actors or activities. For both approaches, contingency elements occur in these processes (Frohmann, [1995](#), [2004b](#), [2008](#), [2009](#)).

In the first section, we viewed the tutorial project as an example of user-driven innovation. However, the ANT analysis challenged this assumption regarding the two websites. An analysis based on Frohmann's approach helped to confirm this conclusion. As shown here, an analysis using the concept of documentary practices can demonstrate how the videos and the websites, as document work, were informative in relation to quite different practices and historical perspectives. By being associated with practices from the history of the libraries, the two websites represented a recurrent action and can be seen as sustaining stability in relation to communicative tasks in the libraries (Orlikowski and Scott, [2014](#); [2015](#)). Thus, the term 'innovation' has to be qualified, if not replaced by some other term to describe the website activities of the project.

Where the design of the websites reproduces a document work in libraries, the videos can be considered as departing from this. In the language of Yates and Orlikowski ([1992](#)), the videos constitute a potential genre modification based on acts of communication. Thus, the design of the videos is a material manifestation of education institutions' entry into the libraries' local practices. Performing another discursive construction of the concept of information, the videos act as social and communicative agents; they modify activities in libraries, e.g. acts of writing, searching, talking, etc. In this way, the videos might generate instability in relation to communicative tasks in the libraries. They provide a potential framework for exploring innovation in the communication between library and user. In this sense, we can legitimate the continued use of the term user-driven innovation, at least for these kinds of activities in the project.

Conclusion

User participation projects are a quite new organisational practice in Danish libraries, especially in the area of designing digital library tutorials. As shown, the analytical lens of the ANT and documentary practices' approaches produced a more nuanced picture of the tutorials' effects. This is mainly because the digital tutorials in the user participation project were seen as documents. Actor-network-theory analysis illustrated relationships and translations by which the four documents were constituted. Frohmann's approach revealed how the documents were connected to different documentary practices. In sum, by adding Frohmann's approach to the actor-network-theory analysis, we can more fruitfully discuss how the documents act when they are associated with different documentary practices.

The two theoretical approaches have generated novel insights into how activities of a user participation project bring particular forms of documents and their outcomes into being. The different kinds of tutorials have the potential to contribute to divergent discursive construction of the concept of information. As document work, the tutorials are performative, i.e. they enact different phenomena in practice. By opening up these documents, the libraries obtain information about potential strategies that are shaped by relationships and translations. They obtain a grounded understanding of activities and implications that are not only communicated and mediated, but also regulated and disciplined by certain kinds of document work. Thus, document analysis can become an important tool for improving the organisational practices of libraries.

The material product of the user participation project described in this paper was a number of different digital tutorials. It is not the task of the researcher to decide whether one of these tutorials is more 'right' or more useful than the others. That decision will be taken in the relational processes that continue in the seven participating libraries. However, the analysis

and the discussion in this paper have served to elucidate certain key aspects, perspectives and elements from the relationships and translations enacted by the involved actors. Hopefully, it will inspire to future studies tracing not only those relationships mobilised in the project described above, but also new actors and translations enrolled in the networks.

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